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SYMPOSIUM ON PICTORIAL REALISM

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Introduction

by Jennifer A. McMahon

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pictorial realism, depiction, style, cognition, perception, culture, representation

The participants in this Symposium gathered for a two-day conference on Pictorial Realism at the University of Adelaide in October 2004. Our aim was to analyse the notion of pictorial realism with a view to its relevance for the way in which art history is conceived or art appreciated. Specifically, we examined the extent to which the representational content of artworks can be ascertained independently of preconceived theoretical knowledge about the representational system within which the artwork is made. Does knowing what the representational content of the work is depend on having first noticed similarities between the work's content and its subject (object/event depicted), or does noticing similarities between the work's content and its subject depend on first knowing about the work's representational system? Nelson Goodman's examination of systems of categorisation is relevant here. Recognizing a pictorial system may be like 'calling attention to a way of setting our nets to capture what may be significant likenesses and differences.'[1] Papers focus in particular on the implications for understanding pictorial realism.

The exchange of ideas that took place between the participants in this Symposium led to a greater appreciation of the interdependence between intra-cultural and trans-cultural perspectives when conceptualising pictorial realism. A study of the phenomenology of perceiving pictures is necessarily limited to one perspective. Yet such a study can reveal insights into the relation between perceptual knowledge acquired in the course of interacting with the physical constraints of the environment and the 'know-how' drawn upon to understand pictures that is relevant to any cultural perspective. On the other hand, there is an issue of receptivity to certain kinds of representational styles that only a consideration of cultural learning can address.

The papers in this Symposium were not written to stand alone but as part of a larger response to the question posed at the beginning. Together they form a comprehensive response. Together they demonstrate that it is a mistake to conceive of representational systems as either independent of or dependent upon theoretical knowledge. We consider this a false dilemma. Theoretical knowledge is itself constituted in terms of representational systems, as is perceptual knowledge.[2] However, this does not mean that the concept of a pictorial system cannot be analysed. A pictorial system can be analysed, but we recommend that this analysis involve questions relating to perceptual know-how and cultural receptivity. We focus on these elements in our analysis of pictorial realism.

Catharine Abell considers the role of a cultural community in

determining what that culture perceives as realistic. John Armstrong examines how perceiving pictures draws upon aspects of general perceptual know-how. Jennifer McMahon identifies an interface between cultural determinants and perceptual constraints. She looks at how natural perceptual proclivities constrain the cultural diversity of pictorial realisms. Dominic Lopes develops a taxonomy of questions and issues pertaining to the analysis of pictorial realism. He situates the questions posed here within this taxonomy. Key examples used in our discussions were Rembrandt's pen and ink drawing *A Canal with a Rowing Boat* and a contemporary example of the Split Style of the Haida.

A philosophical theory can be more influential in the way in which it envisages the question rather than the answers it provides to it. An insightful question can re-align a problem in illuminating ways. In these papers, we have posed the kind of questions we consider assist the conceptualisation of pictorial realism, and its relation to art appreciation and conceptions of art history.

Convenor:

Jennifer A. McMahon

Contributors:

Catharine Abell, Manchester

John Armstrong, Melbourne

Jennifer A. McMahon, Adelaide

Dominic Lopes, British Columbia

Endnotes

1. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1978), p. 129.

2. See Donald Davidson, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), particularly "The Myth of the Subjective," pp.39-52.

Jennifer A. McMahon

Department of Philosophy

The University of Adelaide

South Australia 5005

Australia

jenny.mcmahon@adelaide.edu.au